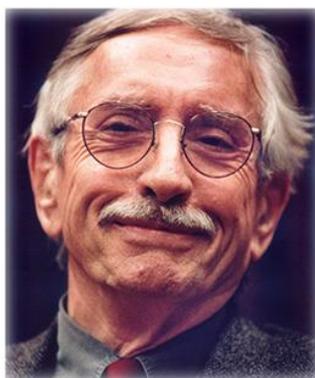


**Hegemony in the Linguistic Fabric of Edward Albee's  
*A Delicate Balance***

**Anusmitha Sebastian, M.A.**



**Edward Albee (1928-2016)**

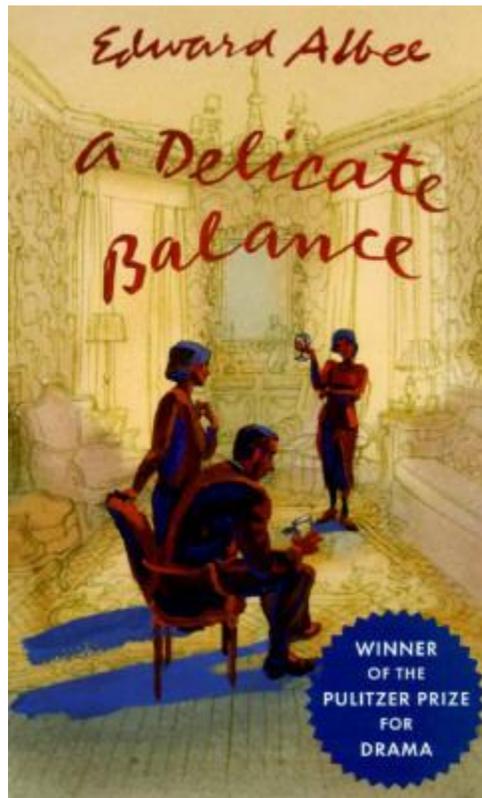
<http://edwardalbeesociety.org/biography/>

**Abstract**

The American School of Absurdism was inaugurated by Edward Albee in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century following his British and European counterparts. Features peculiar to Absurdism, like existential angst, sense of loneliness, experiences of meaninglessness, emptiness, loss of faith in established institutions and breakdown of communication in relationships were explored by Albee in his numerous plays. However, *A Delicate Balance* delves deeper into an area unexplored by other absurdist playwrights, namely hegemony. A set of old friends, the couple Harry and Agnes move into the household of Tobias and Agnes and thence disturb the delicate balance prevailing in a fragile manner in the lives of the latter couple who are already grappling with the death of a young son and the need to handle two women, an acutely alcoholic spinster sister in Claire and a recently returned, much divorced daughter Julia. Power play, domination, hegemony and related colonial traits are brought into force by the visiting couple who arrive as unwelcome guests and leave the hosts both exasperated and relieved on their exit. The impact of their forced visit was much like that of the colonized on the natives and their departure left scars as well as an identity crisis similar to the Post-colonial experience. The

research paper makes a study into Post-colonial dynamics that come into play in a supposedly absurdist play, thereby displacing absurdum with realism. That the descending of a first friendly then oppressive force on a struggling family or country can have irreversible after effects is revealed through the power dynamics conveyed through the verbal interactions and linguistic exchanges between characters. Edward Albee transcends the realm of absurdum in creating a postcolonial discourse in American Drama.

**Keywords:** Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance*, Postcolonialism, Absurdism, power play, domination, hegemony.



### **Power Mongering at Personal Levels**

Power mongering at personal levels forms a major foundation of Albee's plays. The concept of the colonial mindset which is prevalent in small and large transactions at work within the American soil is not altogether outside the orbit of Albee's creative thinking. This colonial consciousness is extracted from Albee's play *A Delicate Balance*, in this paper.

America as a nation has an interesting relationship with colonization. America, in the new age of globalization, privatization and liberalization has a vital role to play as a policy maker in political, social, economic and cultural issues amounting to a domination that is irksome to smaller democracies, to religious and tribal regimes that retaliate in the form of the war on terror. It is identified that the very dynamics that set American as a global, dominating, self-important superpower vis-à-vis its relationship to other countries in the world coincides with and is at work within the interpersonal spaces of the characters in Albee's plays written for the last fifty years.

### **Absurdism and Colonialism**

Absurdism and Colonialism make strange bedfellows. Research work undertaken on American Drama has hitherto refrained from yoking the former with the latter. However, on attempting to neutralize absurdist features of the plays of Edward Albee it is possible to identify that some characters exercise dominion over the mental landscapes, choices, and life of the victimized other with whom they come in contact and establish control akin to that of a colonial impact. This dominion can further be categorized as manipulative, corrosive and invasive of innocence of the victim.

With the expansion of European colonies across the globe, concepts such as colonial, colonizer and colonized burst into origin in the aftermath of western political control. In the last century, however, specific forms of power dynamics operating within human situations are assumed to come under the purview of 'colonialism' even though it primarily refers to the practice by which a powerful country exercises control over less powerful countries and uses their resources in order to further its own interests, wealth and power. Hence 'postcolonial', 'neocolonial', 'decolonizing' have come to bear relevance.

Representing new notions that are dormant in the power structure current literature has thrown up several strands of colonialism like economic colonialism, cultural colonialism, linguistic colonialism, to represent the different manifestations of power, since exploitation and domination are innate human tendencies.

### **Characters of Albee**

It is interesting to note that if the characters of Albee are pitted against each other in a colonizer versus colonized role, a number of traits described as pertaining to absurd plays easily lend themselves

to post- colonial studies too. For instance, the inability to identify the hidden motive of a predator, the absence of recognizably agenda-driven characters, themes that are not fully explained or seen to their final conclusion, incoherent and manipulative dialogues are aspects related to colonial dynamics. Hence it is possible, by a series of permutations and combinations to identify a pattern of the post- colonial in a kaleidoscope reflecting the absurd. The thematic motif of colonial dynamics that runs through Albee's plays overshadows the dominant absurdist one.

### *A Delicate Balance*

When *A Delicate Balance* opened at New York's Martin Beck Theatre in 1966 the play's similarity to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was felt by reviewers. Superficially both plays are indeed similar built around the same motif of two couples who reflect and clarify each other. The colonial occupation of the lives of one couple by another brings turmoil, unrest and the collapse of an artificially maintained order. The 'colonized' couple suffers anxiety that has roots in fear of sterility and annihilation. The impact of the forced presence of visitors at an unprepared spell in their lives is felt in a helplessly strong way by Tobias and Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* and George and Martha in *Who's Afraid a Virginia Woolf*.

Harry and Edna move in, into the household of Tobias and Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* in an unannounced manner. They assert their presence believing they are similar in nature to Tobias and Agnes but soon realize they are different and move out on specifically recognizing that they would never welcome a reversal of the situation. No colonizer can entertain a reversal of roles. In *A Delicate Balance* the anger over the colonial invasion and the postcolonial sense of relief and angst on the invader's exit is spelt out.

It is noteworthy that the arrival of Harry and Edna has all the repercussions of colonial oppression on Julia who is back to her home, psychologically having collapsed from a series of failed marriages. The victimization of the colonized whose physical and mental space is usurped by a foreign presence is evident in Julia's hysterical protection of the sideboard from being used for a drink by Harry.

Julia. Mother? Father! Help me!!.... They! They want!

Edna. Forget It Julia

Harry . (*A tiny condescending laugh* ) Yes, for God's sake, forget it.

Agnes . Go up to my room, lie down

Edna . (*Calm*) you may lie down in *our* room, if you prefer.

Julia . (a trapped woman, surrounded ) *Your* room! (to Agnes) *Your*  
Room? Mine!... I want ... What is mine!! (78-79)

The OED defines that which is hegemonic as 'the ruling part, the master principle' (346). Hegemony is often used to refer to power which is so dominant that it appears unquestionable, even natural. Harry's and Edna's occupation of the house of Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* is reflective of colonial hegemony.

### **Edna's Realization**

The postcolonial experience is evident in Edna's realization at the end of the play that the presence of the uninvited couple was disastrous to the family of Tobias, and in the unpretended relief exuded by Agnes and Tobias.

Edna . ... It's sad to come to the end of it, isn't it .... So much more of it gone by...than left, and still not know- still not have learned... the boundaries... what we may not do... not ask...for fear of looking in a mirror. We *shouldn't* have come ... It sad to know you've gone through it all, or most of it...dry...and not warm. (118)

Cautions cordiality is maintained in the "postcolonial" phase.

Agnes . ... well, don't be strangers.

Edna . (Laughs) oh, good Lord, how could we be ? Our lives are ... the same... I'm going into town on Thursday, Agnes. Would you like to come? (A longer pause than necessary, Claire and Julia look at Agnes.)

Edna. (Cooler, sad) Oh well ... perhaps another week. (119)

A ‘postcolonial’ assessment done by Agnes after Edna’s and Harry’s exit reveals that two additional members, Juila and Tobias have taken to the new habit of drinking in the early hours. Agnes hopes the colonial remnants have not been picked up permanently. The forced evacuation of the intruder has brought a new calm, hope for new beginning and new perspective in the family. The wonder of daylight that brings order, astonishes Agnes as the new, free day begins ushering in an era of relief to live life as they were accustomed to by, shedding the haunting ominous bearings of the colonizer who made the recent exit leaving scars.

### **Tobias’ Household**

An unapologetic occupation of the rooms in Tobias’ household had begun when Harry and Edna forced themselves into the ‘delicate balance’ maintained in the house. When they take unsolicited control of the happenings, conversation and private lives of the inmates much to the latter’s chagrin, the traces of colonial rule are evident.

Julia. What are they *doing* here? Don’t they have a house anymore...

Agnes. Just... let it be.

Julia. (...*controlled hysteria*) why are they here?

Agnes . they have stayed up in their room all day.

Julia. My room. (50-51)

Later Tobias enters, confused.

Tobias . Have... have Harry and Edna...?

Agnes . No, they have not.

Tobias . (... vaguely) well, I thought may be... (53)

### **Domestic Privacy**

Agnes summarises her feeling upon her domestic privacy being invaded, which is resonant of the experience of the colonized native. She says, “... I knocked at Harry and Edna’s *Julia’s* room... I didn’t have the ...well, I felt such an odd mixture of ... embarrassment and irritation, and...

apprehension, I suppose, and... fatigue... I didn't persevere" ( 61-62). On realizing that Harry and Edna do not have plans to leave the house soon, Tobias is forced to admit with a helpless resignation. "Well, ... they're just...passing through" (72).

The colonial domineering voice is reflected when Edna says, "Harry is helping Agnes and Tobias get our bag upstairs" to which Julia says, 'Don't you mean Agnes and Tobias are helping Harry,'" (75) reminding Edna that she and Harry are the guests and not the inmates. The domination has already begun.

When Edna endeavours to express her strong displeasure at Julia having returned from her third divorce, Julia is upset that family matters are discussed by strangers. She screams in a full quivering rage " *You* are a guest in the house" (76). Edna quietly continues rendering her advice that Julia's decision to return forever is a matter of concern to few people. When Julia shouts in anger that Harry and Edna have no rights in the house, the colonizing couple say they have some rights and responsibilities much like the "white man's burden". The colonial presence of Harry and Edna is looked upon by Tobias as help sought in the name of friendship. Julia disapproves strongly saying, " That is not true! They have not *asked* for anything! ...They have *told!* They have come in here and *ordered!*" (107). Julia identifies the colonial presence. A distraught Tobias remains awake pensive through the night thinking of ways to send the intruder away. The predicament of the colonized in the wake of a colonization cold- war is evident in the play *A Delicate Balance*.

### **Brought a Plague, a Terror, a Disease**

Agnes realizes that they have brought a plague, a terror, a disease with them. "... shall we burn them out, rid ourselves of it all... and wait for the next invasion" (110). 'Invasion' is a very significant word in this context. Tobias's hysterical outburst when Harry says he is finally leaving, is the frustration of a colonized native. It is an articulate rejection of the colonizers presence by the colonized victim, one found in stifled countries that have fought hard for their freedom.

Tobias. Do I want? Do I want you here! ... You come in here... with your  
... wife, and your... terror! And you ask me if I want you here? (115)

In a fit of frenzied anger Tobias proceeds to say

... I like you fine: I find my liking you has limits... but those are my limits! Not yours!... I don't want you here... you've got the right!... Do you know the word? The right!... You bring Your plague! You stay with us!... I don't love you! But by God... you stay!..." (116-117)

## To Conclude

Postcolonialism forms the matrix on which the semiotic structure of Albee's texts are built. That post-war angst is not the foremost feature in absurdist plays is proved by the presence of domination and hegemony in the linguistic fabric if supposedly absurd plays like *A Delicate Balance* that bring Albee down from the *avant garde* pedestal to be a realist as a playwright.

=====  
Anusmitha Sebastian, M.A.  
Assistant Professor of English  
Periyar EVR College (A)  
Trichy – 620023  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[anusmitha24@gmail.com](mailto:anusmitha24@gmail.com)